Hormuz and the New Logic of Coercion

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Abstract

The dual blockade in the Strait of Hormuz signals a fundamental shift in maritime coercion and the exercise of state power at sea. Rather than an isolated regional crisis, the blockade reflects a broader structural transformation in which control of strategic chokepoints has become an operational lever of statecraft. This paper examines how the Hormuz precedent establishes a template for future maritime conflicts in the Asia-Pacific, particularly within the First Island Chain comprising the Malacca Strait, Taiwan Strait, and South China Sea. The analysis demonstrates that geography is reasserting itself as a decisive variable in great-power competition, with critical implications for U.S.–China competition, energy security, and global supply chain resilience. The article concludes that the assumption of a rules-based maritime order is giving way to a position-based order in which the capacity to occupy, contest, or close a strait becomes the decisive expression of state sovereignty and power projection.

Strait of Hormuz, maritime chokepoints, First Island Chain, China, Taiwan Strait, Malacca Strait, energy security, blockade, strategic coercion, U.S.–China competition, supply chain vulnerability, naval strategy, geopolitics

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The dual blockade in the Strait of Hormuz reflects more than a regional outbreak. It signals a broader shift in how power is exercised at sea. Geography is reasserting itself as a decisive variable in international affairs. The recent maritime coercion is not merely a series of isolated incidents. Rather, it fits within a structural transformation in which control of strategic chokepoints has become an operational lever of coercion rather than a background constraint. The global market, which relies on the longstanding liberal maritime security regime, no longer operates outside of geopolitical interference.

The U.S. blockade of Iranian ports follows the dramatic U.S.–Israeli military campaign that crippled Iranian command structures and drove Tehran to close one of the world's most important energy arteries. The shock prompted the International Energy Agency to release 400 million barrels from its strategic reserves. Mediation efforts in Pakistan collapsed when Iran's demands for maritime tolls collided with Washington's red lines on various items.

The Hormuz precedent is unlikely to remain confined to the Gulf region. It offers an operational blueprint for the Asia-Pacific, where the First Island Chain—the Malacca Strait, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea—has increasingly become the central battleground on which Washington seeks to contain Chinese maritime expansion and challenge its resource security. While these waterways remain open under peacetime conditions, the Hormuz crisis raises questions about how they might be utilized or contested in future crisis scenarios.

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THE HORMUZ TEMPLATE IN EAST ASIA

The Hormuz crisis is reshaping strategic thinking across East Asia. The chokepoint has shifted from a theoretical vulnerability into a subject of active strategic planning. For decades, global trade operated on the assumption that maritime freedom of navigation was an established norm. Yet Washington's blockade suggests a possible shift toward a more transactional and exclusionary maritime order under conditions of persistent instability. The archipelagos that comprise the First Island Chain are increasingly discussed not merely as defensive perimeters but as maritime gates that could potentially be contested to exert leverage over an adversary's industrial heartland.

The strategic significance of geography is most visible in how regional powers are recalibrating their naval doctrines in light of the Hormuz confrontation. China has spent two decades attempting to construct an Anti-Access/Area-Denial bubble designed to turn the South China Sea into a contested zone for foreign navies. The Hormuz crisis has demonstrated that even a superior naval force can be temporarily stymied by geography and shore-based precision fires.

The power-political significance of these waterways is also being reconsidered through the lens of domestic political priorities. In East Asia, the Taiwan Strait occupies a similarly critical position, representing a geographic focal point where regional maritime control and the credibility of the U.S. alliance system could potentially be tested. Beijing has treated Taiwan as part of China to be reunified, by force if necessary, since the founding of the People's Republic of China nearly eight decades ago.

The Hormuz crisis suggests that when negotiations fail, the following move is the physical interdiction of trade. Regional capitals have taken note. Southeast Asian states such as Singapore and Malaysia now find themselves in a position analogous to Oman or the UAE: essential transit hubs whose stability depends on decisions taken in distant capitals. The rules-based order appears to be giving way to a position-based one, in which the capacity to occupy or close a strait is becoming the decisive expression of sovereignty and state power projection.

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WATERWAYS AS POTENTIAL STRATEGIC LEVERS

The Hormuz blockade offers a test scenario for the so-called "Malacca Dilemma" that has long concerned Chinese strategic planners. China imports approximately 80 percent of its oil and gas via the Strait of Malacca. Yet the U.S. Navy maintains a regular presence there, conducting freedom-of-navigation operations, countering piracy, and asserting the principle of open access.

The Taiwan Strait is a second element in this strategic geography. A potential conflict over Taiwan would not be limited to a localized land battle but could involve systematic efforts to control or interdict maritime traffic. If China imposed a blockade to force reunification, or if the United States moved to block the strait to prevent a PLA crossing, the impact on international trade would be severe. While the Strait of Hormuz carries approximately one-fifth of global oil, the Taiwan Strait serves as a primary corridor for global semiconductor supply chains and handles a significant share of global container shipping.

Any extended closure or militarization of the Taiwan Strait would disrupt fuel supplies to South Korea and Japan—two of Washington's major Northeast Asian allies and advanced semiconductor manufacturers. Both nations import more than 95 percent of their crude oil via routes transiting or adjacent to the Taiwan Strait.

The South China Sea serves as the connecting waterway between these straits. Its ongoing militarization has produced an environment in which an accidental confrontation could trigger a Hormuz-style shutdown. Chinese maritime forces have constructed artificial islands with potential dual-use military infrastructure to support a persistent presence in the waterway. The United States, in turn, has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations and recently expanded joint military exercises. The result is a high-density friction zone in which the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation has grown markedly.

The South China Sea serves as the connecting waterway between Malacca and Taiwan straits. Its ongoing militarization has produced an environment in which an accidental confrontation could trigger a Hormuz-style shutdown

The question of waterway security has thus become a priority concern for East and Southeast Asian nations. Taiwan is the most exposed economy in the region. Liquefied natural gas (LNG) accounted for over 50 percent of the island's electricity mix in early 2026. A naval blockade would cause domestic power production to drop sharply within weeks. South Korea and Japan face similar vulnerability.

The Hormuz crisis has weakened the assumption that such waterways can be managed primarily via international law. It has shown instead that they may increasingly require physical naval presence and coalition deterrence to remain open. Within the First Island Chain, a crisis in one location could create cascading effects in the others.

The result is a strategic paradox. The measures taken to secure a waterway, including the deployment of carrier strike groups or land-based anti-ship missiles, could render that waterway unusable for the commercial traffic such deployments are designed to protect. The shift from trade artery to battlefield has become a primary risk factor for the global economy.

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